

---

REPLY

---

# More on Voting



CECIL E. BOHANON AND  
T. NORMAN VAN COTT

Public-choice analysts have argued for a long time that the probability that an individual's vote will matter in an election with many voters is near zero. Nevertheless, in the brouhaha that surrounded the U.S. election of 2000, media pundits repeatedly claimed that the election demonstrated clearly that "your vote matters." Our article "Now More Than Ever, Your Vote Doesn't Matter" in the spring 2002 issue of *The Independent Review* (591–95) argued that, on the contrary, the 2000 election actually reenforces this public-choice insight. In this issue, however, Jac Heckelman offers several constructive criticisms of our analysis.

First, Heckelman correctly points out that we erred in saying that "only *Florida's* 25 electoral votes and *its* six million voters were decisive . . . the votes of the other 99 million were *not* decisive" (Bohanon and Van Cott 2002, 591, emphasis in original). As he notes, all states that voted for Bush were equally decisive in the election because of the slenderness of the electoral margin. The analogy might be a basketball game won by one point. Some might label the winning team's last-made shot as decisive, but any score the winning team made during the game was equally decisive. Florida's electoral vote was decisive only in the sense that it was contested—not, as we incorrectly claimed in our article, that Florida's electoral votes mattered more than other electoral votes for Bush.

We should remember, however, that the electoral college's actions are largely ceremonial. Scholarly interest in the incentives facing the college's electors is minimal. Each state's electors typically vote robotically for whoever won the presidential vote

---

Cecil E. Bohanon and T. Norman Van Cott are professors of economics at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana.

*The Independent Review*, v. VII, n.4, Spring 2003, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2003, pp. 603–605.

in their state, even though the U.S. Constitution does not bind electors' votes (nor do most states bind their electors). Therefore, any investigation of the "decisiveness" of electoral college voting ultimately must turn on the incentives of individual voters in each state.

Heckelman's second comment deals with these individual-voter incentives. Our article suggested a "recount-triggering" model as a superior alternative to the "tie-breaking" model in the public-choice literature. We claimed that "the probability of [a recount] occurring is the same as the probability of breaking a tie." Heckelman correctly demonstrates that an individual's vote matters *less* in a recount-triggering model than in the typical tie-breaking model.

A simple numerical extension of Heckelman's second point may prove helpful to readers. Suppose there are two candidates, A and B, and Natasha prefers candidate A. Assume there are four other voters—Larry, Curly, Moe, and Harry. From Natasha's perspective, the other voters can line up in sixteen different ways, as shown in table 1. If it takes a tie to trigger a recount ( $m = 0$  in the terminology of our article), and there are six possibilities of such a tie—outcomes 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11. The odds that Natasha's vote will be decisive in that it forestalls a recount, is  $6/16$  or  $0.375$ . This view is identical to the standard formulation of one vote breaking a tie.

Now suppose that the recount margin is four (that is,  $m \leq 4$ ). Absent Natasha, a recount ensues with every outcome. Natasha's vote can put her preferred candidate, A, beyond the recount trigger only in outcome 1. In other words, the odds that Natasha's vote will be decisive in this second recount regime are  $1/16$  or  $0.0625$ . Were  $m \leq 2$ , Natasha's vote puts A beyond the recount trigger in outcomes 2, 3, 4, and 5, making the odds that her vote will be decisive  $4/16$  or  $0.25$ . The more latitude for recounts, the less relevant is an individual's vote.<sup>1</sup>

In large-vote settings, Heckelman's correction means that the probability of an individual voter's triggering a recount is closer to zero than we argued. This correction, though certainly welcome, reminds us of a story about a high school physics teacher who noted in his class one day that current theory implies that the universe as we know it will decay in six billion years. "What did you say?" exclaimed a usually inattentive young student suddenly startled by the revelation. "I said the universe will disintegrate in six billion years," replied the teacher. "Oh, thank goodness!" replied the student. "I thought you said six *million* years." The difference between six billion and six million years is important to physicists, but not to the rest of us. Likewise for specifications of the degree to which individual voters are irrelevant. Degrees of irrelevance are interesting to public-choice scholars, but of little intrinsic interest to anyone else.

Investigations into voter irrelevance do teach a larger lesson, however, a lesson that neither Heckelman nor we noted. The voters who are irrelevant, *whatever the*

---

1. Note that with four voters other than Natasha, margins of 1 or 3 are not possible. Note also that were Natasha to favor candidate B, the odds that her vote would be decisive in B's favor are the same.

**Table 1**  
**The Sixteen Voting Outcomes**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Larry	A	A	A	A	B	B	B	B	A	A	A	A	B	B	B	B
Curly	A	A	A	B	A	B	A	A	B	A	B	B	A	B	B	B
Moe	A	A	B	A	A	A	B	A	B	B	A	B	B	A	B	B
Harry	A	B	A	A	A	A	A	B	A	B	B	B	B	B	A	B

A and B = candidates

*degree of their irrelevance*, are likely to be uninformed voters. Uninformed voting, an undeniable flaw in the democratic process, justifies limitations on the scope of the public sector. Interestingly, such limitations probably must be constitutional if the hazards of uninformed voting are to be avoided in setting the limitations themselves.

# SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

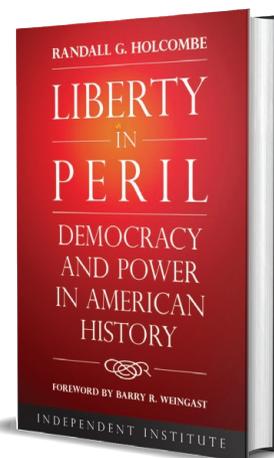
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

**SUBSCRIBE**

*The Independent Review* is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

